

# Egypt's "independent" unions seek to end strikes, prop up junta

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After more than seven months of military rule in Egypt, the revolutionary movement of workers and youth is reaching a second climax. Yesterday hundreds of thousands gathered again on squares and streets all over Egypt and demanded the downfall of the regime and the ouster of Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi.

In Cairo several mass demonstrations headed from working class neighborhoods to the iconic Tahrir Square with workers demanding "Bread, freedom and social equality". Some were holding a banner reading: "The bottom line is: we will no longer be ruled by US or EU, though we sincerely love their peoples". In the coastal city of Alexandria thousands of workers marched calling for "A revolution in all of Egypt's factories" and chanting "No more privatization". In Port Said, a city at the northern entrance of the Suez Canal, demonstrators shouted "Down, down with military rule" and "The People, not SCAF, are the only red line", referring to the hated Supreme Council of the Armed Forces headed by Tantawi.

As was the case in the first 18 days of the revolution that led to the ouster of long-time dictator Hosni Mubarak, the working class is the main social force in the renewed mass movement. Since the end of Ramadan, hundreds of thousands of workers across Egypt have participated in mass strikes and protests demanding higher wages, better working conditions and social equality.

The renewed upsurge of the Egyptian working class, sparked by the disastrous social conditions and a deepening economic crisis, is sending shock waves through ruling circles around the world. The Egyptian bourgeois media is conducting a vicious campaign against "class based protests", which are leading to "chaos", and demanding an end to all strikes and protests. In recent days, several columns and editorials appeared in Egyptian newspapers warning of the threat of "a second revolution".

To prevent a "revolution of the hungry" the junta is stepping up its preparations for a violent crackdown on striking workers. Egypt's military rulers have recently announced an expansion of the emergency laws and are

moving to enforce the anti-strike law. During the last weeks, scores of protesters have been arrested, sent to military trials and reportedly been tortured by police and military forces.

Before the protests on Friday, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces issued a 75th communique warning that it will "not tolerate any attacks on the army or public installations." In Suez, one of the epicenters of the revolution, the armed forces moved into the city to secure government buildings, banks and the central offices of the Suez Canal Authority.

Despite the brutal efforts by the junta to halt the protests, workers are continuing their mass strikes. Commentators already compare the situation to the first stage of the revolution when the mass actions of workers ousted Hosni Mubarak. A second revolution against the SCAF would not only threaten military rule in Egypt but the capitalist order and imperialist domination throughout the region.

At this crucial point of the revolution, the so-called "independent" trade unions and their pseudo-left supporters such as the Revolutionary Socialists (RS) and the Democratic Workers Party (DWP) are playing an increasingly important role to defend bourgeois rule in Egypt. They are becoming the main mechanism through which the Egyptian junta disarms and disorients workers in order to bring the revolution to a halt. These petit-bourgeois forces are working consciously as agents of the bourgeoisie to convince workers to end their strikes and to go back to work.

On September 17, hundreds of thousands of teachers went on strike for the first time since 1951. According to media sources, up to 80 percent of the 1.5 million teachers participated in the strike. The movement of the teachers reached its peak last Saturday when thousands of teachers gathered in front of the Egyptian Cabinet headquarters demanding the immediate removal of Ahmed Gamal Eddin Moussa, the current minister of education. They also called for a minimum wage of 1,200 EGP gradually rising to 3,000 EGP. Currently a teacher's net salary is EGP 287 (US\$48) per month maximum.

The junta became increasingly nervous about the strike, and according to some reports, the military police beat up and injured some of the protesting teachers. Meanwhile, a delegation of the Independent Teachers Syndicate (ITS) met with representatives of the interim government headed by Prime Minister Essam Sharaf.

Despite the fact that Moussa declared that "the current budget limitations prevented meeting" the educators' demands, Hassan Ahmad, the chairman of the ITS, announced the suspension of the teachers' strike. He declared that the ITS was willing to give the ministry one week to present a solution to the grievances of the teachers. Reportedly, Hassan took the decision to call off the strike without consulting the workers, who wanted to continue the sit-in. Despite the betrayal of the unions, media sources reported that teachers in a number of schools in Beni Suef, Sharqiya, Suez and parts of Cairo are continuing their struggle.

Only three days later, on September 27, the Independent Union of Public Transport Workers (IUPTW) also tried to end the strike of 45,000 transportation workers in Cairo. Representatives of the IUPTW met with minister of manpower Ahmad Hassan El-Borai in order to discuss the situation and agreed on an immediate suspension of the strike without any concessions made by the government. The Egyptian daily *Al-Ahram* reported that the minister merely "promised" to meet the demands of the workers.

According to *Al-Ahram*, the transportation workers of most of the capital's 25 bus depots refused to suspend their strike. They declared that the minister's "promise" was "unacceptable" and also rejected the deal the union reached with El-Borai. On Wednesday, September 28, the streets of Cairo were completely free of public buses and *Al-Ahram Online* wrote that it was "unable to reach elected officials in the Independent Union of Transport Workers to confirm that the majority of workers rejected the deal or formally decided to abstain from working."

The attempt to cancel the strikes clearly shows the class character of the so-called independent unions. They are deeply hostile to the interests of workers and work hand in hand with the military junta to suppress the working class in order to stabilise capitalist rule in Egypt. For exactly this purpose the building of independent unions has been promoted by the US State Department and foreign ministries of other Western countries. The Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) – the main NGO involved in building the independent unions – reportedly receives funding from the European Confederation of Trade Unions and the American AFL-CIO.

The rejection of the "independent" unions sponsored by the junta's backers in Washington is an important political

step to be taken for the Egyptian working class. The central political task of the Egyptian Revolution must now be the building of independent organizations of struggle to bring down the military junta and establish a workers' government to pursue socialist measures.

This only viable perspective for the Egyptian workers to achieve their social and democratic rights is most vocally opposed by the pseudo-left forces of the Socialist Front, such as the state-capitalist RS or the DWP. In a situation where the workers call for the downfall of the junta and increasingly renounce the straitjacket of the independent unions, these forces act as the open defenders of bourgeois rule. The RS and the other pseudo-leftist forces brazenly oppose a "second revolution" and are the main advocates of the independent trade unions.

After the IUPTW called off the strike of the transport workers, the RS published a statement which instead of attacking the union for its betrayal, defended the statement signed between the government and the union leaders as an important step towards "final victory". They wrote: "What has been achieved by public transport workers so far confirms that they are on the verge of a final victory". The statement by the RS is utterly deceitful. Why should workers believe that the empty "promises" of a brutal anti-working class military junta are some sort of victory?

The Egyptian revolution has reached a point where the class divisions between the working class and the Egyptian bourgeoisie – the junta and its pseudo-left supporters amongst the trade-unions and other middle-class forces – is more pronounced than ever. Workers are escalating their strikes and protests now in open confrontation with the junta, the independent trade unions and the pseudo-left groups.

On Friday, September 29, one day before the mass protests, the DWP and other pseudo-left groups entered a coalition with various bourgeois parties putting forward toothless demands on the military council. The call by workers to bring down the junta represents a complete repudiation of the counterrevolutionary policies advanced by these petit-bourgeois forces.



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